

District Judge

Working alone

I am in an almost unique position as a district judge. For a start, most of the time I sit completely alone – no clerk, police officers, or court staff. This is in the rather informal surroundings of my chambers – a room, not a court room with a bench, witness stands or any of the trappings that the public imagine a court of law looks like. The same room has to double as chambers for private hearings and a court for public hearings. My only protection is the desk in front of me and a panic button – using a conventional open court is not an option unless one of the circuit judges is not using theirs. For district judges in other courts where accommodation permits it, however, cases may be taken in a conventional courtroom or in chambers.

A lot of ground to cover

Then there are the areas of the law that I cover – I am expected to have a working knowledge of the law, practice and procedure affecting civil disputes (contract, negligence, personal injury, property disputes, civil injunctions etc.) and family disputes (divorce, nullity, disputes over children and finances, domestic violence etc). Many district judges, in addition, have to master bankruptcy, dealing with bankruptcy petitions by both creditors and debtors and the winding up of insolvent companies. Some courts are also District Registries of the High Court so on top of everything else there is High Court business and possibly even Admiralty cases to be conducted by the district judges based there. County courts which are also care centres, as is mine, will further require expertise by the district judges sitting there in public law affecting children. There is potentially a lot of ground to cover.

Emergencies

I also may be asked, on hardly any notice, to deal with emergency situations such as applications for injunctions because of domestic violence or because a child has been snatched from a parent, or a person arrested as a result of the breach of a court order; or applications to stop bailiffs taking possession of property, or to stop building works encroaching on someone else's property.

All walks of life

However, there is one area which stands head and shoulders above the rest in importance – people management. Most of the individuals who appear in front of me do not have the benefit of legal representation and they range from one end of the spectrum to the other. With no one else to support me and with minimal protection, I am required to be not just a knowledgeable lawyer but a social worker, psychologist and therapist as well. I will be dealing one-on-one with all strata of society from incredibly diverse backgrounds with only occasional help from legal representatives.

An early start

An average day starts well before the morning list is due to begin. This is for two reasons. Not only do I have the day's case papers to read but also have to deal with 'paper orders' known as 'boxwork'. These are orders made in the absence of parties such as directions for the conduct of a case, dealing with enforcement of judgments, determining applications for adjournments of hearings and considering online financial consent orders.

Family work

My caseload will often depend on what day of the week it is. Tuesdays and, occasionally, Wednesdays tend to be family business days so I could be dealing with interim financial remedy hearings (these cases concern the division of assets and maintenance on the breakdown of marriage and the interim hearings involve ascertaining the issues, giving procedural directions, indicating how the parties might settle and encouraging them to settle) and children directions appointments (concerning disputes over the welfare of a child). Every couple of weeks or so we have directions appointments when we have the services of a Cafcass Officer to assist parties in trying to resolve their differences in disputes about children without the need for the court to make the final decision. And then there are the family cases where there has been no settlement and which must be tried. These can take one or two days to be heard – sometimes longer.

Landlords and tenants

Thursdays are usually Possession Day when I will deal with either landlord and tenant claims, both public and private, or mortgage possessions. We tend to deal with local authority and Registered Social Landlord cases in bulk so it is not unusual to find oneself facing a cause list of 60-75 cases on one day.

Varied Fridays

Every Friday is for fast track trials and small claims. About 20 of these claims are listed between two district judges. The other days in the week are left for general applications, enforcement proceedings, short small claim hearings. Each day one of the district judges is designated as the 'urgent judge' dealing with applications to suspend warrants, injunctions and other matters which are listed at the last minute.

Catching up with colleagues

The district judges in my court try to meet regularly in order to discuss matters of interest and to preserve a degree of consistency. 'Bouncing thoughts' off each other is a useful exercise and one in which the circuit judges are only too willing to participate. We have a lunch meeting of all the judges at least once a week.

No two days the same

Add to this catching up with my judicial e-mail, catching up on the latest case and statute law and regulations in order to make sure that I am up to date with my law and I have a fairly full day. No two days are the same – that's part of the excitement of the job.